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ABSTRACT

In 1969, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) established a centralized student-specific data system from which state and federal reports and management information could be developed. However, this system provides no information about students and graduates after they leave the system. In order to augment the inconsistent data gathered through follow-up surveys and feedback from senior colleges, the VCCS needs access to in-state and out-of-state databases that compile student-specific rather than aggregate data. Student-specific data permits the matching and merging of data records from other sources with the VCCS data system to produce a database for management information, assessment, academic and institutional research, and for compliance with federal higher education regulations and anticipated accrediting requirements. Specifically, the VCCS perceives a need for: (1) access to the Virginia Council of Higher Education's student-specific data system to receive transfer information by name, social security number, and other data elements; (2) the development of partnerships with other states that would allow the transfer of information from the higher education state data files and the unemployment insurance files of the employment commission across state boundaries; (3) modification of the federal unemployment insurance file to indicate the employee's full- or part-time employment status and specific occupation; (4) the development of federal regulations that are easy to implement at the college level with simple definitions and comparable data; and (5) the reassessment of student classifications to better reflect student intent and goals, creating some categories that may not fit easily into federal or state classification structures. Technology is available that will allow the collection and sharing of data and information; what is needed is a change in thinking. (MAB)

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UNMET DATA NEEDS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

A CALL FOR PARTNERSHIP

JOHN HARRIS

VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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SHEEO/NCES NATIONAL DATA CONFERENCE

CRYSTAL GATEWAY MARRIOTT HOTEL

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In mid-April I received a telephone call from Nancy Schantz requesting that I participate in a panel at the SHEEO/NCES Data Conference on unmet data needs of community colleges. I was happy to respond in the affirmative because there are a number of significant issues surrounding our unmet data needs and this conference is the ideal forum to discuss these issues.

I make these observations to you after administrative data experiences gleaned from four years in the military, 13 years in the business world, and 25 years in the higher education community as an employee of the Virginia Community College System. I have served in both staff and line capacities. Also, I have been extensively involved over the last several years with the "Washington scene" through membership on the AIR Data Advisory Committee, involvement with the SHEEO/NCES conferences in 1990 and 1992, taking part in the development of the NPRM on Student Right-To-Know, and participation in the Perkins Vocational Education Data Base Task Force in 1992.

In developing this paper I will rely heavily on the Virginia picture. I realize, of course, that each of the 50 states has its own unique pattern, so what I describe may not be the precise situation that exists in higher education in your state. However, I will summarize at the end of the paper actions I believe the federal government should initiate, actions that should occur on an interstate basis, and actions that should occur within states.

The VCCS in 1969, the fourth year of operation, implemented a centralized student specific data system from which state and federal reports and management information would be developed. That data system is not perfect,

but it has provided us through the years with an excellent data base for statistical reporting. That data base enabled us in 1992 to respond to the new Council of Higher Education student specific data system with relative ease.

The unmet need for Virginia's community colleges is what happens to our former students and graduates after they leave the college as it is with all colleges and universities. We have "bits and pieces" of data and information garnered through follow-up surveys and feedback from senior colleges for assessment purposes, but we do not have consistent data across time that provides us the comprehensive view we need.

Some of the weaknesses of collecting information through follow-up surveys relate to: (1) not having the latest address of the graduate or former student, (2) low response rate to surveys, and (3) reluctance of graduates and former students to provide salary data even when that question relates to salary ranges rather than salary specifics.

Two things generally happen to students and graduates when they leave a community college. They either transfer to a senior college or they become involved in the labor market. Data systems that would allow us to track former students and graduates on a student specific basis in these two areas would be extremely valuable to us.

We need access to data bases (both in-state and from border states at the beginning) on a student specific rather than an aggregate data compilation basis. Student specific data allows us to match and merge data records with

our own student specific data system. By doing this we would be able to create a data base for management information, assessment, academic and institutional research, and for compliance with federal higher education regulations such as Student Right-To-Know, SPRE, Perkins, and other regulations that may be forthcoming. In addition, accrediting agencies are beginning to draft regulations requiring specific data on student outcome measurements.

But we need to go beyond state borders or to put it another way we need to move from intrastate data systems to interstate data systems. We would be particularly interested in having access to data systems in our border states, namely, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia. This would provide data on transfers and employees that would complement data systems in Virginia in important ways, particularly for our community colleges adjacent to the border states.

We have not been allowed access to the Virginia Council of Higher Education's student specific data system to receive transfer information. We have invested considerable resources in that system, but without the concomitant benefit of access. In 1991 the VCCS expended 5 percent of the computer programming resources on state and federal reports. In 1992 the figure was 18 percent and in 1993 the figure was 13 percent. We estimate that the percentage will remain between 12 and 15 percent for the next several years. In other words, our costs have gone up considerably. The Council of Higher Education has data that we desperately need and the Council staff need to realize the sharing of resources is good management.

One reason we need access is accurate information. Senior public colleges provide transfer data to community colleges for assessment purposes and for fall 1992, those records indicate there were about 4,000 transfers. The data system of the Council of Higher Education indicates there were about 8,000 transfers. Part of the difference in those numbers relates to definitional problems of who is a transfer, but it also points out that student tracking by SSN is probably the best way, and may be the only way, to obtain accurate transfer data.

Now let me set forth actions at three levels that would enhance the data sharing concept that I have been talking about.

INTRASTATE LEVEL

I plead with the representatives of the Council of Higher Education in Virginia to share a data file with us by name, social security number, and other data elements of students previously enrolled in a community college who are now enrolled in a senior college, public or private.

I challenge other states to share back with community colleges transfer information, if you have a student specific system. If you do not have a student specific system, then one needs to be developed for the time has come for states to develop at the state level student specific data systems.

INTERSTATE LEVEL

Interstate partnerships need to be developed that would allow the transfer of information from the higher education state data files and the unemployment insurance files of the employment commission across state boundaries. When I served on the Perkins National Data Base Task Force, David Stevens of the University of Baltimore made us aware of a labor market outcomes study he conducted that used the unemployment insurance files from several states. I believe the higher education councils in each state have a role to exercise as a repository and clearinghouse for interstate data exchange.

FEDERAL LEVEL

There are several actions I recommend for the federal government:

1. Modify the unemployment insurance file to indicate whether the employee worked full-time or part-time and what the specific occupation of the employee is.

2. Influence Congressional legislation to reflect a model of higher education that exists in the nineties. In too many cases legislation reflects the post World War II situation of the late forties and early fifties and does not take into consideration less traditional higher education institutions such as community colleges.

3. Develop regulations that are easy to implement at the college level. Current proposals on Student Right-To-Know and graduation rates are a classic example of possible overkill. The more simple the definition the greater the prospect of data comparability. The greater the comparability of data the greater the possibility of data exchange among colleges. If current proposals are not simplified, I predict a possible replica of VEDS that occurred in the late seventies and early eighties.

4. Recognize that the classification of students by a college may not reflect true student intent or true student goals. We need to rethink student classification and possibly create new student classifications. The Virginia Community College System is embarking on a study of how we classify students with the idea of creating some categories that may not easily fit into IPEDS or the state of Virginia classification structures.

5. Foster data exchange. NCES has published a new Facilities Inventory and Classification Manual that should encourage the sharing of data among states on facilities information that would meet a variety of needs.

A key buzz word in Virginia at the present time is restructuring. Restructuring is not belt tightening. Rather, it is developing new and different (presumably more effective and efficient and less costly) ways of doing business including the utilization of technology. The technology is available that will allow us to collect and share data and information. The data systems may not always be in place, but they can be developed. What is needed is a change in thinking about

our function and role in this process. Enormous benefits would accrue to higher education and society if we can make the adjustment.

Thank you very much for allowing me to share these ideas with you.

JH/cj